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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, SA/PD

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS PINR PHUM CE

SUBJECT: Campaign Snapshot: President sacks all non-cabinet ministers; Key Minister Moragoda resigns

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 111032Z Feb 04

- (B) Colombo 226, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

¶1. (C) In this message, Mission reviews the following items revolving around Sri Lanka's parliamentary election campaign:

-- In transparent bid to circumscribe GSL's powers before election, President Kumaratunga fires junior ministers;

-- Protesting that move, key Minister Milinda Moragoda resigns from office, but will contest election;

-- Ambassador urges campaign restraint in separate meetings with key presidential adviser and President's brother;

-- Tamil tea estate workers' party agrees to run joint campaign with Prime Minister's UNP party; and,

-- "The Flavor of the Campaign": The battle of party symbols and colors begins.

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President Fires all Junior Ministers

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¶2. (U) Late February 11, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga sacked 27 non-Cabinet ministers and 12 deputy ministers. Only those ministers who are part of the 34-member Cabinet retained their positions, including Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, Foreign Minister Fernando, and Finance Minister Choksy. The sacked ministers and deputy ministers have also been ordered to return their official vehicles. According to Janadasa Peiris, presidential media spokesman, President Kumaratunga herself now is in charge of all the non-Cabinet ministries. Practically speaking, day-to-day decision-making will probably devolve to the level of the secretaries (the chief civil servants) in each ministry.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: The President's move appears to be legal under the terms of Sri Lankan law and it was not a surprise: there have been reports from her office since elections were called on February 7 that she planned to cut the PM's ministerial cohort down. That said, although cost-cutting was cited as the rationale, her move was quite transparent in its political intent: the President is clearly trying to circumscribe the Prime Minister's ability to distribute largesse and favors ahead of the April 2 election. For his part, the PM publicly complained on February 12 that the President's action undermined the peace process and made it impossible for the GSL "to fulfill its responsibilities" under the terms of the February 2002 ceasefire accord with the Tigers. END COMMENT.

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In response, Key Minister Resigns

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¶4. (U) In response to President Kumaratunga's move to sack the junior ministers, Milinda Moragoda, Economic Reform Minister and a key adviser to the PM, resigned his ministerial positions late February 11. Moragoda's sudden resignation came in protest of his removal, per the order by the President earlier in the day, as Deputy Minister of Policy Development and Implementation. In tendering his resignation to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Moragoda said in a letter: "Given the current situation, I do not think it would be possible in anyway for me to contribute to the progress of the country and the welfare of our people." In his letter, Moragoda added that he looked forward to running for Parliament from his Colombo electoral district on the

Prime Minister's United National Party (UNP) ticket.

15. (C) COMMENT: Moragoda was clearly taken aback by the President's decision to remove his deputy ministerial portfolio. He told the Ambassador on February 12 that he did not feel he could do any useful work in his Economic Reform portfolio under the current circumstances. A very proud man, Moragoda apparently decided in a fit of pique to take the opportunity to clear his slate clean. His resignation is not a surprise, however: On several occasions since he took office in December 2001, Moragoda has threatened to resign due to presidential and other slights. Though he is now out of office, Moragoda appears set to continue to serve the PM as an adviser on foreign policy and peace process issues, as well as all-round troubleshooter. END COMMENT.

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Ambassador Presses Campaign Restraint

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16. (C) On February 11, Ambassador Lunstead met with Lakshman Kadirgamar, key presidential adviser and the newly appointed Minister for Information and Media (Note: Additionally, Kadirgamar was Sri Lanka's foreign minister from 1994-2001). The Ambassador also met February 12 with Anura Bandaranaike, President Kumaratunga's brother and a senior MP in her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The Ambassador used both meetings to underscore the point that the upcoming parliamentary election campaign should not be a divisive one. The Ambassador noted that attacks on the peace process during the campaign could have a long-lasting negative impact and he urged that the state media act with restraint. Kadirgamar said he took the point, remarking that he had issued instructions to state media outlets to be fair. He added, though, that he could "not control everything said during the campaign." The Ambassador also expressed concern about the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) -- now allied with the SLFP -- and its extremist policies, noting in particular its comments on economic issues. Both Kadirgamar and Bandaranaike responded that the JVP may use heated rhetoric, but the group would not be in position to act in a negative manner if the SLFP-JVP combine won the election.

17. (C) COMMENT: Since taking over state media in November (via sacking the then-information minister), the President and her party have ensured that state TV and the press hew a strongly pro-SLFP, anti-UNP line. This line is mixed in with a dose of anti-peace process rhetoric. For example, a newscast on state media on February 8 referred to "the so-called peace process," a point which the Ambassador raised with Kadirgamar and Bandaranaike. If these trends are not reversed or, at worst, continue to torque up, the tone of the campaign will degenerate quickly and the peace process could take a lot of hits. Regarding the JVP, Bandaranaike has played a key role in the SLFP in working with the radical group. He heard our message regarding restraint, but it is as yet unclear whether he will act on it. END COMMENT.

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Tamil Estate Workers ally again with UNP

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18. (SBU) In a boost for the Prime Minister, the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) has agreed to support the UNP in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The CWC, representing tea-estate Tamils from Sri Lanka's interior highland region, supported the UNP in the previous December 2001 parliamentary elections and is a current member of the governing United National Front (UNF) coalition. Joining the CWC will be V. Puthrasigamoney, a SLFP MP from the tea-estate region, who broke ties with the President's party after a series of public disagreements in late 2003. (Note: The Upcountry People's Front, another party representing tea-estate Tamils, will likely give its support to the Tamil National Alliance.)

19. (C) COMMENT: The UNP campaign organization has been slow to get in gear. This has helped lead to a feeling of seeming dejection among some UNP stalwarts. G.L. Peiris, a key minister, for example, appeared to lack confidence when he discussed the campaign with the Ambassador on February 11. It is still very early in the campaign cycle, however. The fact that the CWC -- a party with solid backing in the tea estate region (and which usually wins several seats in Parliament) -- plans to remain allied with the UNP is a positive sign for the Prime Minister. It is also important for the UNP that the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) come on board. The

SLMC allied with the UNP in the last election, but has not yet finally agreed to work with the UNP this time around. END COMMENT.

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"The Flavor of the Campaign": Symbols and Colors
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¶10. (U) In our "flavor of the campaign" section: Party symbols and colors are a large part of "brand recognition" in Sri Lankan political campaigns and Sri Lanka appears in for burst of sensory overload. In the vibrant world of symbols and colors, the UNP plans to retain its traditional elephant symbol and green color motif. In the meantime, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the name for the recent SLFP-JVP linkup, has already changed their symbol thrice from the lotus to the butterfly to the betel leaf. Although the betel leaf is green, the UPFA's colors are blue and red. Most of the Tamil parties have agreed to unite under the Tamil National Alliance/Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) "rising sun" symbol and accompanying yellow/red color motif. The CWC is represented by a cockerel and its color is dark green, while the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress goes by a tree symbol with green and yellow colors.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: In general, Sri Lankans love election campaigns, and go all out in holding colorful, loud rallies and marches (voter turnout is usually quite high, hovering at about 70 percent). This campaign may not be quite as popular as past campaigns because the election was called years early and it is Sri Lanka's fourth in under five years. Despite that, Sri Lankans will probably go for the gusto this campaign, too, if all the attention being paid to party symbols and colors is any guide. END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD